

DEFENDING  
*your*  
FAITH

AN INTRODUCTION TO APOLOGETICS

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*Defending Your Faith: An Introduction to Apologetics*

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## INTRODUCTION

Years ago I was reading a novel (whose title and author escape my memory) in which a dialogue ensued between a priest and a scientist. The scientist remarked acidly, “You give me your faith, and I will give you my reason.” This glib exchange underscores the widespread assumption in our day that reason and faith are incompatible and antithetical. Religion has been banished from the public square (except in times of national crisis) and exiled to a reservation ruled by faith. Faith is viewed as a subjective, emotive quality leaned upon by the weak or uneducated. It is the opiate of the masses, the bromide for the unintelligent. Faith is a crutch to support the psychologically crippled—those who lack the scientific and sophisticated view of the real world.

The task of this book is to set forth, in a brief and non-technical way, the basic truth claims of Christianity, and to show that at its core Christianity is rational. That which is irrational or absurd is not worthy of either belief or personal commitment. It is the fool who embraces irrationality. To embrace the absurd is to be engaged not in faith but in credulity.

It is one thing to maintain that Christianity is rational, however, and quite another to confuse Christianity with rationalism in any of its many forms. The term *rationalism* comes loaded with much baggage that cannot be borne by orthodox Christianity. But

the problem with rationalism is not reason or rationality. The problem is found in its suffix, the *ism*.

It is one thing to be human, quite another to embrace humanism. It is one thing to be feminine, quite another to embrace feminism. It is one thing to exist, quite another to embrace existentialism. Likewise, one need not be a rationalist to be rational.

An apologist in the twentieth century once observed that the church has become suspicious of reason because she has suffered the “treason of the intellectuals.” The loudest guns of criticism fired against historic Christianity have not been salvos launched from *outside* the church but have been vicious attacks from *inside* the church.

Enemies of Christianity have recited the mantra that religion rests on blind faith and not reason for so long that many even within the church have actually come to believe it. This demonstrates the maxim that if you repeat a lie often enough people will begin to believe it.

My hope is that people will begin to see that both rational inquiry and empirical research serve to support the truth claims of Christianity and do not undermine it. I share the biblical conviction that it is the fool who says there is no God (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). The wise of this world are thereby shown not to be so wise after all.

Christianity is based on far *more* than naked human reason but by no means upon *less*. Though divine revelation carries us beyond the limits of rational speculation, it does not sink below the bar of rational intelligibility.

In this book I restrict my concern to the two most crucial issues of apologetics: the existence of God and the authority of the Bible. These are not the most crucial questions of all; the issue of the person and work of Christ is more important ultimately than the question of the authority of the Bible. But from the standpoint of apologetics the strategic priority of the defense of Scripture is clear. If the Bible is established as carrying the weight

of divine authority, then its teaching on the person and work of Christ is thereby confirmed.

Defending the faith to the best of our ability is not a luxury or an indulgence in intellectual vanity. It is the task given to each one of us as we bear witness to our faith before the world. I hope this book will help the reader to that end.

—R. C. Sproul  
Orlando  
Easter, 2003

## THE TASK OF APOLOGETICS

One major facet of our work at Ligonier Ministries is helping Christians know what they believe and why they believe it. This is the work of apologetics. The task or science of Christian apologetics is primarily concerned with providing an intellectual defense of the truth claims of the faith. The term *apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which literally means “a reasoned statement or a verbal defense.” To give an apology, then, unlike the more current definition of “I’m sorry,” is to defend and argue for a particular point of view.

The work of apologetics rests upon a biblical command. We find a mandate in Scripture to defend the faith, a mandate that every Christian must take seriously. In 1 Peter 3:14b-16, the apostle writes,

Have no fear of them [those who would harm you], nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, *always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you*; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame (emphasis added).

We are exhorted in this passage to stand ready in case anyone asks us to give a reason for our hope as Christians. This, Peter declares, is one way we regard Jesus as the holy Lord. Secondly, notice the

ethical emphasis in verse 16: we are to answer all inquiries—even the abusive ones—with gentleness and respect, so that those who revile Christians as evildoers might be ashamed. In this passage we see the reason for and importance of engaging in the task of apologetics.

### *Apologetics in the Early Church*

The church fathers knew this task all too well, for the early Christian community was accused of participating in many devious acts. Leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Christianity had been viewed by the Roman Empire as a subset or sect of Judaism. But upon the holy city's destruction and the ensuing Diaspora (scattering of the Jews), the separation of Christianity from Judaism became evident. The problem for Christianity was this: Judaism was a legally sanctioned religion in the Roman Empire; Christianity had no such luxury. The practice of the Christian faith was illegal and subject to prosecution. The Christian intellectuals of the time rose up to answer the charges that were leveled against Christianity.

In many apologetic writings of the period (for example, Justin Martyr's *Apology* and Athenagoras's *Plea*), we can see four common accusations against Christians. First, the Christian community was charged with sedition—Christians were regarded as traitors undermining the authority of the empire. As early as 29 B.C., emperor worship had emerged, most notably in the Asian city of Pergamum, and it continued well into the second century A.D. Reciting the phrase *Kaisar kurios* (Caesar is lord), burning incense to the emperor's image, or swearing by his name was required in order to prove loyalty to the state. The Christians refused to grant worship to the emperor and so were seen as disloyal and as being involved in political conspiracies. While believing that governments were to be respected (Rom. 13:1-7), apologists like Justin Martyr argued that Christians were exemplary models of civic virtue, paid their taxes, and submitted to the civil laws, but were unable to confess Caesar as lord because Jesus was the one

and only Lord worthy of worship. Justin therefore challenged the authorities to not convict Christians on the basis of invalidated rumors.

Second, the charge of atheism was leveled against the early church, because of the Christians' refusal to worship the pantheon of Roman gods. Consider the story of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who, in his late eighties, was brought before the emperor Marcus Aurelius on charges of atheism. The emperor, not wanting to make a martyr out of the venerable bishop, sought to provide an avenue of escape for him. As Polycarp stood in the middle of an arena teeming with Roman citizens, Marcus Aurelius promised to spare his life on one condition: that he deny Christianity by declaring, "Away with the atheists!" The aged bishop, no doubt grinning, pointed up to stands filled with pagans and cried, "Away with the atheists!" The emperor was not amused by Polycarp's gesture and executed him that day as the crowds looked on. Justin Martyr, who was also murdered during Marcus Aurelius's reign, argued in his *Apology* that Christians were not atheists but totally committed theists, who, while affirming the reality of a single, supreme God, denied the polytheism of the Roman pantheon.

The third and fourth charges brought against early Christianity came as a result of rumors concerning their secret meetings in places like the catacombs. From the practice of "love feasts" (where early Christians partook in a common meal—including Holy Communion—attesting to their unity with Christ and each other) came rumors of incest and sexual perversion. The final accusation came from the practice of the Eucharist itself. Early Christians were charged with cannibalism. Word spread that during the secret meetings, these Christians were engaged in the eating and drinking of human flesh and blood. The apologists answered this allegation by explaining the sacrament and calling on the authorities to validate such allegations before persecuting anyone.

In conjunction with these common accusations leveled against the early church, Christians were also regarded as intellectually

inferior—often because the doctrine of the Trinity seemed a contradiction to the Greek philosophers. Platonism and Stoicism ruled the day, and most philosophers charged Christians with myth-making. An early glimpse of this collision between the Christian faith and pagan philosophy can be seen in Acts 17, the famed account of the apostle Paul on Mars’ hill. Such was the state of defending the faith for the first three centuries of the Christian church. Advocates of Greek philosophy accused Christians of contradiction or challenged the consistency of such doctrines as the Incarnation or the Resurrection. The first defenders of the faith responded ably to these challenges.

In every age the church faces the task of clarifying its truth claims from distortions against these claims. The discipline of apologetics did not die in the second century; rather, it lives on, because with each passing generation, wherever Christianity flourishes, so too do distortion, misrepresentation, overemphasis, and outright malicious deceit. The church’s opponents will continue to accuse her of doing evil (this is assumed in 1 Peter 3:16), and so the Christian apologist assumes a defensive posture in order to repel false accusations whenever they come.

### *The Apologist’s Task: Proof and Persuasion*

Apologetics, however, does not just entail defense. It also involves offense, the positive task of constructing a case for Christianity that shows itself to be applicable to every culture, as well as being the only (and therefore the best) alternative to the world’s philosophical and theological systems of thought. In other words, apologetics can be used to show that Christianity is true and that all non-Christian worldviews are false. The best way to go about constructing a case for the Christian faith is partly the concern of this book. Not all Christians agree on where to start this task. But we do all agree on this: non-Christian thinking, according to Scripture, is “folly” (Ps. 14:1; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16; 3:18–23).

The skeptic at this point might respond, “Prove it,” which is a good thing, because proof is actually another facet of the apolo-

getic task. Sadly, in our day many Christians argue that we ought not to be engaged in attempts to “prove” the truth claims of Christianity, that faith and proof are incompatible. While it is true that Reformed theologians generally believe that human nature is radically corrupt (which is a scriptural viewpoint: see 1 Kings 8:46; Rom. 3:9-23; 7:18; 1 John 1:8-10; cf. John 6:44; Rom. 8:7-8), they wrongly assume that, since in our corrupt nature we are unable to respond positively to the gospel, this spiritual inability renders the apologetic task useless. If objective proof cannot persuade a person to respond to Christ without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, then why bother trying to give sound arguments for Christianity?

Before we answer this objection, let us remember Peter’s words, “Yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Pet. 3:16). The apostle clearly expects that one outcome of apologetics is that the enemies of Christ are put to shame. This is reminiscent of the great Genevan reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), who wrote in his *Institutes* regarding the proof of the authenticity of biblical prophecies, “If godly men take these things to heart, they will be abundantly equipped to restrain the barking of ungodly men; for this is proof too clear to be open to any subtle objections.”<sup>1</sup> If anyone believed that the total inability of man required the Holy Spirit to convert a soul, it was Calvin. Likewise, if anyone believed in the total inability of apologetics to convert a soul, it was Calvin. He, of course, did not abandon the apologetic task but still used evidence and argument to prove matters of faith—not to convert the hearts of the ungodly, but to “stop their obstreperous mouths.”<sup>2</sup> This is a large part of the task of the Christian apologist: to prove the Christian worldview, and to rely on God to cause the acquiescence of the unbelieving heart to the soundness of biblical doctrine. The church is up against not mere ignorance but biased enmity (Rom. 8:7). Only the Spirit can overcome this enmity, but the Spirit never asks people to believe what is absurd

or irrational. Calvin noted the distinction between *proof* and *persuasion*. Proof is objective and persuasion is subjective. People who are hostile to certain ideas may have those ideas proven to them, but in their bias they refuse to be persuaded—even by the soundest of arguments.

Apologetics, for this reason, is not merely about winning an argument. It is about winning souls. The old aphorism rings true: “People convinced against their will hold the same opinions still.” That is why, for example, if a Christian were to “win” an intellectual debate with a non-Christian, the victory celebration may never take place. The non-Christian might concede defeat, though usually not until his head hits his pillow at the end of the day. This may never translate into conversion, but there is some value to this aspect of “winning” an argument. On the one hand, as Calvin said, the unbridled barking of the ungodly may be restrained; and on the other, the intellectual victory provides assurance and protection to the young Christian who is not yet able to repel the bombardment of criticism from scholars and skeptics. It serves as a confirmation of the Christian’s faith.

The Christian bothers to engage in apologetics because, quite simply, how will the nonbeliever hear the truth of Christ Jesus “without someone preaching?” (Rom. 10:14c). Not everyone could accomplish what Justin Martyr or Athenagoras did, but they gave credibility as well as confidence to the whole Christian community of the second century, and by extension the Christian church throughout history has benefited from the fruits of their labor.

### *The Scope of This Book: God and the Bible*

One question we face as Christian apologists is how we should proceed in our argument. I take the position that the best starting point for apologetics is with the existence of God. If we can establish the existence of God first, then all the other issues of apologetics become easier to defend. Others believe that it is better to establish the authority of the Bible first. If the authority of

the Bible is established, it clearly affirms the existence of God, the reality of creation, the deity of Christ, and so forth.

Other apologists prefer to argue from history. They first try to prove the deity of Christ and then reason back from Jesus to the existence of God.

In this book, after a discussion of the very important theme of epistemology, which addresses the question of how we can know anything at all, we will consider the issue of the existence of God and then move to the authority of the Bible. I see these as the two macro-issues of Christian apologetics. If God and the Bible (that God is, and that he has revealed himself to us) are established, then all the rest of the issues with respect to Christianity will be vastly simplified. Issues of the Resurrection, the deity of Christ, and so forth, can then be resolved by careful biblical interpretation.

This book, therefore, is both introductory and restrictive. It is not a comprehensive study of apologetics but a primer on the two major propositions we must defend: the existence of God and the authority of the Bible.

## APOLOGETICS AND SAVING FAITH

If ours is a reasonable faith and not a mere exercise in credulity or superstition, how do we “justify” or prove the truth claims of Christianity? Where does reason fit, in the pilgrimage of faith?

Faith is so central to Christianity that we frequently refer to the Christian religion as the “Christian faith.” Within historic Protestantism, faith has also been at the core of the doctrine of salvation. The central maxim of the Reformation was justification by faith alone. With such a strong emphasis on faith, we wonder at what point (if any) reason comes into play.

If one’s theology is not merely Protestant or evangelical but more precisely Reformed, the issue of the relationship between faith and reason becomes all the more acute. Reformed thinkers believe that nobody comes to faith in Christ until God the Holy Spirit changes the disposition of his or her soul. All of the arguments and reasoning that we bring to bear in Christian outreach will be to no avail unless or until God the Holy Spirit changes the heart of the hearer. Though apologetics is a task given to us as Christians, and we are to be responsible in the handling of the truth claims of Christianity, apologetics may aid in the planting and watering of the seed, but only God can bring forth the “increase” of faith (1 Cor. 3:6, KJV).

*Apologetics and the Three Levels of Faith*

Some people believe that since it is the Holy Spirit's task to convert and not *our* task, since conversion is beyond the realm of our power, we don't need to be engaged in a defense of Christianity. They might say, "To give arguments for the truth of Christianity, to give reasons for our faith, would be to undermine the work of God the Holy Spirit." I hear Christians say, "I don't want to study philosophy because I don't want to get in the way of the Holy Spirit."

Though I believe that only the Holy Spirit can change a person's heart and ultimately a person's mind—that only the Spirit can bring a person to repentance—nevertheless apologetics is important in what is sometimes called "pre-evangelism" and also in "post-evangelism."

In pre-evangelism, apologetics supports necessary elements of saving faith. When Luther declared in the sixteenth century that justification is by faith and by faith alone, one of the immediate questions that arose was, "What kind of faith saves?" In words variously attributed to Luther or Calvin, "Justification is by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone." The only kind of faith that saves is what Luther called a *fides viva*—a living faith, a vital faith, a faith that issues forth in works as the fruit of faith. Those works don't count toward justification—only the merit of Christ counts toward that—but without the flowing forth of the fruit of faith, there would be no true faith in the first place.

The thinkers of the sixteenth century distinguished among several actual nuances or levels or elements of faith that together comprise saving faith. The three main levels of faith, they said, were *notitia* (sometimes called the *notei*), *assensus*, and *fiducia*.

Beginning with the third level, *fiducia* is personal trust and reliance, that aspect of faith that involves a genuine affection for Christ that flows out of a new heart and a new mind. It is the *fiducia* level of saving faith that can be engendered only by the work of the Spirit. It is with the first two—*notitia* and *assensus*—that the apologetic task has to do.

The first element of faith is *notitia*. When we say that we are

justified by faith, the faith that justifies has to have a *content*. There is certain content, an essential level of information, that is part of Christianity. When the apostles went out to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, they gave a summary of key points about the person of Jesus and about his work—how he was born according to the Scriptures, how he suffered on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead, and so forth. That is all part of the *notes*, or the data or content of faith. Before we can actually call people to saving faith, we have to give them the information or the content that they're asked to believe, and that involves the mind. It involves communication of information that people can understand.

Before I can call upon Christ as my Savior, I have to understand that I need a savior. I have to understand that I am a sinner. I have to have some understanding of what sin is. I have to understand that God exists. I have to understand that I am estranged from that God, and that I am exposed to that God's judgment. I don't reach out for a savior unless I am first convinced that I need a savior. All of that is *pre-evangelism*. It is involved in the data or the information that a person has to process with his mind before he can either respond to it in faith or reject it in unbelief.

The second element of faith is *assensus*. This is simply the Latin word for intellectual assent. If I ask, "Do you believe that George Washington was the first president of the United States?" what would you say? Yes! That doesn't mean that you have put your personal faith and trust in George Washington. I've just asked you if you believe in George Washington in the sense of whether your mind gives assent to the proposition "George Washington was the first president of the United States."

Sadly, there is a movement in theology today that says faith has nothing to do with propositions—that the Bible is simply a book that bears witness to relationships. It is relationships that count, not propositions. These are the people who think that, "All I need to be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with Jesus. I don't need doctrine. I don't need any theology. I don't need to affirm any creed." "No creed but Christ!" is the call here. "I

don't believe in propositions. I believe in Jesus. He's a person, not a proposition."

It is true, as such people say, that one can have a knowledge of the propositions of Christianity and still not know Jesus. We can know *about* Jesus and not have a personal relationship *with* Jesus. Yet when we talk to people about this Jesus, with whom we have a personal relationship, we say things about him. We say, "This Jesus is the eternal Son of God." That is a proposition. The Jesus I want to have a relationship with really is the eternal Son of God. We can't have a saving relationship personally with this Jesus unless we know who this Jesus is, unless we can affirm the truth of this Jesus—that he really did die on the cross in a death that was an atonement, and that it is true that he came out of the tomb. If we say we have a personal relationship with Christ but don't believe in the truth that he was raised from the dead, then we're saying we have a personal relationship with a corpse. That's all the difference in the world from saying you have a personal relationship with the resurrected Christ. All of those things that we say we believe about Jesus involve the mind saying yes to propositions.

If we gain a correct understanding of the content (*notitia*) and assent to its truth (*assensus*), however, this does not add up to saving faith. The devil knows the truth about Christ, yet he hates him. *Notitia* and *assensus* are necessary conditions for saving faith (we can't have saving faith without them), but they are not *sufficient* to save us.

Apologetics serves a vital task at the level of clarifying the content of Christianity and defending its truth. This cannot *cause* saving faith but it has a vital role in supporting the necessary ingredients of saving faith.

### ***Faith Is Not a Blind Leap***

Today we have been infected by something called "fideism." Fideism says, "I don't need to have a reason for what I believe. I just close my eyes like tiny Alice and take a deep breath, scrunch

up my nose, and if I try hard enough, I can believe and jump into the arms of Jesus. I take a blind leap of faith.” The Bible never tells us to take a leap of faith into the darkness and hope that there’s somebody out there. The Bible calls us to jump out of the darkness and into the light. That is not a blind leap. The faith that the New Testament calls us to is a faith rooted and grounded in something that God makes clear is the truth.

When Paul encountered the philosophers at Mars’ hill, he said, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). This was not a claim to secret knowledge. There is none of that in Christianity. When Paul was before Agrippa he said, in effect, “King Agrippa, these things were not done in a corner. Jesus was crucified openly. Christ came out of the tomb, not in secret, but publicly, where we have eyewitness after eyewitness testimony” (see Acts 26:26).

We may think that Paul’s testimony is that of a lunatic and therefore give it no credibility, but we see the difference between making a case for the truth and merely asking people to believe without any reason. The task of apologetics is to show that the evidence that the New Testament calls people to commit their lives to is compelling evidence and worthy of our full commitment. That often involves a lot of work for the apologist. Sometimes we would rather duck the responsibility of doing our homework, of wrestling with the problems and answering the objections, and simply say to people, “Oh, you just have to take it all in faith.” That’s the ultimate cop-out. That doesn’t honor Christ. We honor Christ by setting forth for people the cogency of the truth claims of Scripture, even as God himself does. We must take the trouble to do our work before the Spirit does his work, because the Spirit does not ask people to put their trust and faith and affection in nonsense or absurdity.

# NOTES

## CHAPTER 1 THE TASK OF APOLOGETICS

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 20 of The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.8.8 (88).
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Henry Beveridge, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1962), I.7.4 (71).

## CHAPTER 4 THE LAW OF NONCONTRADICTION

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25-26.
2. Aristotle *Metaphysics*, IV.3.8.

## CHAPTER 6 THE LAW OF CAUSALITY

1. John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, n.d.), 147.
2. John Stuart Mill, quoted in Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1957), 4.
3. Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 3-4.

## CHAPTER 7 HUME'S CRITIQUE OF CAUSALITY AND THE BASIC RELIABILITY OF SENSE PERCEPTION

1. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding / A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 18.

## CHAPTER 9 NATURAL THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

1. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 20 of The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.3.1 (43-44).
2. Widely attributed to Galileo Galilei, who may have been quoting Cardinal Cesare Baronius.